

# QAnon as an American Quasi-religious Formation

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## Abstract

In the past decade, through the formation of Web 2.0 architecture, researchers pointed out novel ways of social involvement: newfound frontiers have opened for challenging the verification systems of former metanarratives. This situation allowed the existence of parallel “truths.” Combined with the contemporary American societal environment of distrust and uncertainty, alternative narrative movements, such as QAnon, emerged around 2017. The anonymous online forums of 4Chan and 8Chan offered ideal incubating spheres for a series of vivid conspiracy theories, which after a time, appeared on more popularly used social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok.

In my paper, I will argue that these conspiracy theories function as quasi-religious systems for a certain segment of the American population. The “pick-and-choose” systems allow these individuals to find greater meaning in their lives while joining a thriving online - and in the past years, even offline - community. These formations adopt certain, highly visible elements of traditional forms of religiosity - especially resembling the structures of new religious movements - such as the aims for a higher/hidden truth, for a higher/hidden truth, for a higher/

hidden truth, character of an all-knowing prophetic leader, the Us vs. Them attitudes, etc. Using Ninian Smart's system, one with a keen eye may find structural and functional similarities between religiosity and fanatical conspiracy beliefs.

**Keywords:** conspiracy theories, conspirituality, QAnon, new religious movements, new social movements

## 1. Introduction

In the past decade – through the formation of the so-called Web 2.0 architecture<sup>1)</sup> – newfound frontiers have opened for challenging the verification systems of former metanarratives. Among these frontiers, one overshines any other competitor: the online sphere, and especially *social media*. Through the catalyzing effects of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok (i.e., sensationalism, the “trending” effect, and the overall ability of mass sharing and formerly unseen connectivity and information transfer between individuals) – combined with the fallacies of checking the truthfulness of the shared information –, researchers have witnessed an unprecedented emergence of parallel “truths.” These alternative “chosen truths” thrive best in conspiracy theories and networks. The presence of multiple (even conflicting) answers may provide an unlimited resource for expanding and diversifying these alternative views. The interpretation of chosen truths also generates an extensive market in societies with social environments dominated by *distrust*, *division*, and *general uncertainty*. In the author's view, these social-environmental requirements – as well as adequate

1) For definition, see: <https://gyires.inf.unideb.hu/GyBITT/08/ch02s02.html#idp59521600> Accessed: 2023.02.25.

technological embeddedness – are appropriately fulfilled in the United States in the past half a decade. Several alternative narrative movements have emerged in these conditions, catalyzed by the unassailability of freedom of expression and free speech. Among these, we may also find the appearance of the QAnon movement around 2017. This alt-right-based revolutionist new social movement functions as a quasi-religious meaning system (at least for a certain segment of the American population), offering alternative – yet ultimate –, answers for existential questions, such as one’s place in the world, the reasons behind personal suffering, as well as grand narratives about contemporary events of like wars, diseases, societal strife, the disintegration of former foundational value systems, (etc.).

From an academic perspective, there is a multitude of fascinating aspects of the movement, that shows the quasi-religious functionality: the “pick-and-choose” attitude – known from NRMs and New Age movements – allows the involved to efficiently create and/or find frameworks with greater meanings in their lives, while also connecting them to a thriving online – and in the past years offline – community. There are certain parallels with structures of new religious movements – such as the aims for a higher or hidden truth; the *chosenness* of the involved, the coping mechanisms; the projected image of an all-knowing and unquestionable prophetic leader; and even the *Us* vs. *Them* attitude. It is apparent that conspiracy theories have the capability to function as supplementary structures for other (already established) congregations, where these ideas may thrive and spread on even more elevated levels.<sup>2)</sup> However, it seems that this particular conspiracy network has also attained an adequate number of traits, known from religiosity to exist on its own, operating as a competitor to established religions, effectively becoming a genuine alternative *quasi-religion*. To approach the presented issue, one needs to create an adequate a priori statement, in order to avoid losing focus on the details of this complex and multifaceted issue. It follows:

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2) Karen M. Douglas et al., “Understanding Conspiracy Theories,” *Political Psychology* 40, S1 (2019).

*In the United States alt-right new social movements – such as the QAnon conspiracy-theory movement – function as placeholders and extensions of religious structures, adopting functional aspects of the hollowing structure of civil religion.*

Contemporary New Social Movements inherit a majority of traits and discourses in which New Religious Movements were formerly discussed in the early 1990s, such as (1) their active and targeted reach to particular cohorts of society; (2) their tendency to split into branches of *ultra-orthodoxy* and various *radical reformist* groups with great following, after internal strife, or the loss of charismatic leader(s); (3) their active presence in society creates heated public discourses about the place and possible requirements for limitations of foundational rights (such as religious liberty, rights for public gatherings, rights for personal freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of self-expression, etc.); (4) the parallel expressions in public debates, which were adopted from former NRM related debates – such as the re-emerging terms of *sect* and *cult*, *social disruption*, *brainwashing*, *re- and deprogramming*, *coercive control*, etc.<sup>3)</sup>

## 2. What's *new* about new social movements?

To grasp what is *new* about these movements, it is most effective to compare them to their pre-industrial forerunners. According to Steve Buechler,<sup>4)</sup> one may find fundamental differences between the two in regard to their aims, their base community, and the means utilized to archive their goals.

While former movements aimed to represent their issues through economic or

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3) Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson and Egil Asprem, *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, Brill handbooks on contemporary religion Volume 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp.21-48.

4) Steven M. Buechler, "New Social Movement Theories," *The Sociological Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1995), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4120774>

political channels, contemporary movements generally tend to avoid these institutional levels and remain on social or (sub-)cultural layers. Considering their following, new social movements may find their base communities within the so-called new middle class,<sup>5)</sup> compared to the generally lower-income industrial classes of former movements.<sup>6)</sup> The organizational structure of new movements also reflects the changes of base demography: contrary to the historically known nationwide centralized movements, contemporary formations consist of informal, or loosely organized cells of activism, rallied around a sole issue – but with capacities to form bonds with other related cells, or movements with common ideals –, which may result in a higher membership-flux between these groups.

From a scholarly perspective, new social formations stand ‘in between’ religiosity and ideology (considered in a strict sense). Contemporary movements are more than traditional ideological movements: they possess a number of traits that can be only found in religiosity (such as charismatic authority, higher moral-, or ethical imperatives, etc.). These traits however operate quite differently in particular movements, offering new, innovative functionalities and great variance within the phenomena. Nevertheless, one cannot clearly categorize them as something religious either. In the author’s opinion this state of ‘in-betweenness’ offers a unique opportunity and invites observers with keen eyes to expand their perspectives beyond the conventional themes and frameworks of religious studies. By bringing closer the two mentioned endpoints, one may learn how new formations take up specific tasks of religious institutions (such as the mentioned moral- and ethical guidance; the presence of a charismatic-prophetic leader; or alternative meaning to religiously embedded social constructs – such as family, adulthood, marriage, etc.–), qualifying these as quasi-religious formations.

To approach this complex issue, it is beneficial to adopt David Aberle’s<sup>7)</sup>

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5) A segment of society with higher income, more stable financial backgrounds, greater upward social mobility and higher education.

6) Generally speaking, these cohorts could be described as financially less-stable segments of society, with lower educational levels and income, resulting in scarcer opportunities for upwards social mobility.

7) David F. Aberle and Harvey C. Moore, *The Peyote Religion Among the Navaho*, 2nd ed. (Chicago:

classification system of four open categories regarding social movements.<sup>8)</sup> The first one of Aberle's categories is "alternative movements". These are typically focused on self-improvement and are limited to specific changes to the individuals' beliefs and behaviors. Examples of this type could be Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), and Planned Parenthood. These movements are thematically limited to one type of issue and aim to provide ways for personal betterment or self-improvement on individual levels. Aberle's second group is the class of redemptive movements (sometimes also referred to as religions movements). These "meaning-seeking" formations are typically focused on one specific segment of the population (usually their internal congregational populous, or a defined cohort, such as young mothers, incarcerated individuals, addicts, homeless people, refugees, etc.). Such movements aim to provoke inner change or spiritual growth within these groups. Several church-organized, or funded movements fit into this category, such as the spiritual retreat- and counseling movements of Evangelical Christian educational programs, or the prison missions and rehabilitation programs of various congregations. Thirdly, reformative social movements seek to change something specific about the entirety of the social structure. These movements aim for more limited changes but target the entire population. Typical examples of this category would be the non-radical environmental movements, women's rights movements, or the more contemporarily the "Buy Nothing Day" - which protests the rampant consumerism of Black Friday. Finally, revolutionary movements seek to completely change every aspect of society in a rapid and dramatic way. Examples include progressive-radical civil rights movements, radical environmental movements, and alternative political movements from both ends of the political

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University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp.315-52.

8) Although Aberle's model was adapted to "historical" social movements, the author of this paper views Aberle's model as an efficient general framework for contextualizing contemporary movements as well, mainly because his system classifies movements according to the active effects on targeted segments of society and the radicality of their expressed goals. This makes the system effectively independent of temporal variants and highly adaptable to any historical, or social environment.

spectrum. Most importantly the paper's exemplum, the QAnon movement would also fit into this category, as the movement aims for global and radical changes – or as some followers refer to it – “global redemption.”

However, at this certain point, it is necessary to make a minor note: most researchers of contemporary social movements do not consider right-wing and alt-right movements as new social formations. They categorize these as sheer political radicalism, or racially articulated political ideologies, rather than new social movements. This type of distinction in the author's opinion isn't just foundationally flawed, but it oversimplifies the complex phenomena around the issue. Moreover, the avoidance also prevents adequate academic discourse about a seemingly more-and-more severe issue about prominent segments of contemporary social movements. Nelson Almanzar Pichardo in his study titled *New Social Movements: A Critical Review* also shares these remarks and highlights the fallacies of a missing critical standpoint.

### 3. Approaching the issue: the “*scène*” and the methods

The emergence of new social movements – and especially QAnon – is due to the general socio-psychological “scene” of the 2010s in the USA. To grasp this, one must first observe a segment of the starting a priori statement: “hollowing structures of civil religion”. Contemporary American society has a multitude of foundational cornerstones, of which civil religion is one of the most impactful. Civil religion<sup>9)</sup> (a term coined by Robert N. Bellah) – refers to the implicit religious value systems of the United States expressed through public rituals, symbols, and ceremonies presented at certain times and places, which are

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9) Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967), pp.1–21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027022>

considered sacred, or meaning-bearing. This system is considered a collective minimal common ground within the populous, functioning as a cohesive element, while simultaneously minimizing the possible frontiers for conflict. This general framework – when working efficiently–, ensures the presence of a transcendent verification in an extremely interreligious and highly diverse social environment. The generality of the structure also ensures that any possible societal conflicts are kept minimal, by exclusively utilizing universally understandable and acceptable ceremonies, rituals, and symbols. However, this verification or meaning-system was challenged by the emergence of counter-movements,<sup>10)</sup> the so-called cultic milieu,<sup>11)</sup> and the popularity of new and alternative religious movements presenting, reformed, reinvented, or restored concepts, as well as alternative political & social ideologies. These new ideals and perspectives destabilized the civil religion, crumbling the cohesive functionality of this system, thus creating divisions and social distress along age, gender, political, religious, and ideological differentiations. Simultaneously one needs to inspect a number of unsolved issues, in American society, that caused (and still cause) ongoing tensions in contemporary America. Out of these, the author would only highlight three, by relevance to the specific topic. First of which is systematic education – or precisely its inefficiency. The lack of comprehensive knowledge regarding historical and geographical facts, combined with the rejecting attitude towards empirical studies, provided (and still provides) a fertile soil for accepting misconceptions, misinterpretations, half-truths, and conspiracy theories spreading through mostly online platforms. The public trust in official and government-provided data, as well as scientific studies and state specialists’ testimonies, is constantly rejected by an increasing number of citizens in the past decade.<sup>12)</sup>

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10) Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp.1–42.

11) Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööv, “The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization,” *Nova Religio* 8, no. 1 (2004), pp.115–118.

12) Pew Research Center – *Trust in America: In the age of COVID-19, do Americans trust science?* See: <https://www.pewresearch.org/2022/01/05/trust-in-america-in-the-age-of-covid-19-do-americans-trust-science/> Accessed: 2023.02.25.



The second element is the advancements of the World Wide Web in the past ten-twenty, years, which further intensified this tendency. In today's age, where the production of certain news and information is at its highest and easiest in human history, the verification or falsification – or even the monitoring of said contents – has turned into an almost impossible challenge. Here one needs to mention the structure of the World Wide Web, and its second “evolutionary” stage, generally referred to as Web 2.0. This (current) architecture allows a more streamlined way for an increased informational flow between users and creates an optimal environment for easier and faster connections and exchanges. However, at the same time, it also offers opportunities for the exploitation of free speech and it is effectively unable to tackle or even react to the issues of false-information creation and spreading (not to mention the human rights violations online, personality thefts, defamation cases, exploitive sensitive data usage, etc.).<sup>13)</sup> This informational free flow also birthed a certain paradigm change in social studies.<sup>14)</sup> Researchers realized that in an age, where individuals may have the capacity to search for highly personalized information, they may obtain the capability to create their own ‘personalized reality’ completely divided from the real world.<sup>15)</sup> At this point, the factual reality's importance diminishes, as the individual's chosen truth overtakes its position. In this invented reality the individual may exist according to their own needs up until a point, when their reality perception necessarily clashes with others, creating an unresolvable situation, in which the partaking sides will not even agree on the most fundamental common grounds.

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Pew Research Center – *Public Trust in Government: 1958-2021* See: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/05/17/public-trust-in-government-1958-2021/> Accessed: 2023.02.25

- 13) Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, “Where Web 2.0 Went Wrong,” in *Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture* / Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, & Joshua Green, ed. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, 47-84, Postmillennial pop (New York: New York University Press, 2013), pp.47-84.
- 14) The most visible step in the academic field regarding this recognition of the phenomenon, was the decision made by the editorial board of Oxford Dictionaries, who chose *post-truth* as Word of the Year in 2016, after witnessing a 2000% spike in academic texts compared to 2015.
- 15) Lee C. McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, The MIT Press essential knowledge series (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), pp.123-51.

This process on a macrosocial level brings forth the post-truth era, in which certain individuals may believe that the “Moon landings never occurred”, the “Earth is actually flat”, or that “Australia doesn’t even exist”, just to name a few of the most known – yet most nonsensical – conspiracies.

Finally, researchers cannot ignore the general attitudes in US society regarding medical problems and mental-health assistance. In past years mental hygiene issues became less of a taboo – especially among the youth.<sup>16)</sup> However, individuals outside this demographic cohort are still struggling with minor or major mental problems,<sup>17)</sup> as seeking professional mental-hygienic assistance is still closely associated with psychiatric treatments of the early 1970s. Readers may find interesting parallels in a case study published by the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences of the University of Maryland, cooperating with the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) after the QAnon-inspired Capitol riots in January 2021. The study focused on statistical evaluation of the occurrence of mental health issues among Capitol rioters. Their findings suggest a clear correlation between these two, as almost two-thirds (60-68%) of the present and self-declared QAnon supporters have been diagnosed with mental health issues, according to court records and public sources.<sup>18)</sup> In the case of these mobilized individuals, one may observe a great sum, who have found so impactful existential meanings in QAnon conspiracy theories, that they even considered armed assault in historical public spaces, to support and defend their concepts. Once again, such offense within a highly valued sphere of civil religion could not have been imaginable even a few decades earlier. It strengthens the first claims of a diminishing common value

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16) T. F. McHugh & J. Sabatini & Z. Zhang, *Mental Health in the Post-Pandemic Workplace: A Culture Shift towards Transparency & Empathy*. (Boston: Boston College Center for Work and Family, 2021), See: <https://archive.hshsl.umaryland.edu/handle/10713/17351> Accessed: 2023.02.25

17) These may vary widely from simple feelings of isolation and alienation, loss of connection or control over one’s life, up to the points of clinical cases of depression, bipolar disorder, and even attempted suicide and self-harm, due to complete loss of grasp over reality.

18) M. Jensen & S. Kane, *QAnon Offenders in the United States*. (MD: START. 2021), See: <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/qanon-offenders-united-states> Accessed: 2023.02.25

system and the appearance of “parallel truths” in society.

Summarizing these three intertwined elements: there is a noticeable distrust towards official scientific and academic observations within the US populous. The overwhelming number of alternative ideas (catalyzed by online social media platforms) combined with a general discarding attitude towards medical assistance in need, coexisting in the same segment of society, creates a highly receptive basis for conspiracy theories. For these individuals, conspiracies will not function as simple alternative ideas regarding certain enclosed issues and debates but will form more foundational – existential and ontological – paradigms as well. The involved ones reformulate their own conceptions of reality, the integrity of body and soul, and the effective power of an individual in and over society, incorporating the ideas from alternative, personally fitting conspiracy theories. These may manifest in the form of ideas about astral bodies battling with each other over the rulership of the universe during political debates aired on television, the effective power of exorcism on public and societal institutes, or the synchronous usage of ritual items from different religious traditions, such as the *shofar* from Judaism,<sup>19)</sup> or crystal healing from mainstream esotericism and yoga.<sup>20)</sup>

Finally, approaching the case of QAnon, the author recommends a guiding perspective: Ninian Smart’s seven-dimensional system.<sup>21)</sup> Smart’s model is more than optimal for analyzing religious and social movements within the same framework: it allows researchers to highlight parallel functionalities of meaning systems, as well as to draw parallels between the two spheres. By observing the issue from this perspective, researchers may grasp more efficiently the quasi-religious elements and functionalities of conspiracy systems and understand

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19) See: <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/lloyd-wolf-the-jewish-photographer-who-captured-photos-of-capitol-mob-655365> Accessed: 2023.02.25

20) See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/15/technology/yoga-teachers-take-on-qanon.html> Accessed: 2023.02.25

21) Ninian Smart, *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion*, Heslington lectures 1966 (London: Faber, 1968).

their meanings for their following, as well as the mechanisms through which these movements shape their followers' concepts of reality and their own place in it.<sup>22)</sup>

#### 4. QAnon: a brief introduction

Due to the abovementioned systematic problems, it isn't really puzzling why the US was filled with uncertainty and distrust around 2016. Combined with the year's intense political challenges (i.e., the 2016 elections) and a great number of international tensions (the North-Korean missile- and nuclear tests, the BREXIT process, multiple political *coup d'éclat* attempts worldwide, the atrocities of the Syrian civil war, etc.), readers may understand the general unease and tension in US society. In this social environment, a certain individual (or individuals) under the username of "Q Clearance Patriot",<sup>23)</sup> (later shortened to "Q"), posted a series of eccentric conspiracy theories on the online forums of 4chan and 8chan.<sup>24)</sup> Given the username and the anonymity of the platform – functioning as protective barriers–, the phenomenon around these messages and "prophecies" grew into the first manifestation of QAnon. The author(s) of these messages existed in a kind of parallel history of our contemporary world, in which a

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22) Smart differentiates (1) narrative (2) experimental (3) social (4) ethical (5) doctrinal (6) material and (7) ritual dimensions.

23) The name refers to the highest possible authorization provided by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), which is required to access Top Secret Restricted Data, Formerly Restricted Data, National Security Information, and Secret Restricted Data. Due to the designation of the various levels of classification, it is no surprise, that most conspiracy theories integrate these in one way or another. In the case of QAnon, it is usually the primary source of Q.

24) The so-called 'chans' (2chan, 4chan, 8chan, and now its successor 8kun) are anonymous image boards for "extremely online" individuals. These boards serve as a place for anonymous rallying and amplifying certain issues. The so-called "online raid culture" originates from these types of sites, as these communities were extremely successful in targeted online attacks, such as fake user creations, DDOS, flooding, online harassment, etc.). Amongst the many subforums, one may find political ones with quite radical ideas (The adaptation of such ideas is the so-called "red-pilling" as the users refer to it).

“Deep State” seized all power decades ago (in some theories, even centuries ago). The aim of these encrypted messages<sup>25)</sup> was to reveal this all-encompassing conspiracy against the world, which seemingly attempted to tie together and explain everything from “Pizzagate”<sup>26)</sup> through ISIS, to the prevalence of mass shootings in US schools, all the way back to the point of the JFK assassination. It claimed that the US military assisted Donald Trump<sup>27)</sup> to become president with intentions of dethroning said “Deep State.” The process of this hidden civil war is referred to as “The Storm,” after which the Deep State’s leaders are going to be revealed to the public, subsequently arrested, and trialed publicly. This series of events will be followed by Trump restoring the USA’s former hegemony in the world. Said final goal is titled “The Great Awakening.”

At the first (and second) phase of the QAnon movement, the reach of these odd theories was strictly limited by the forums’ (4chan & 8chan) regular userbase and required a sort of “insider knowledge” to even find the threads and messages, where these were to be found.<sup>28)</sup> The shared contents of these periods

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25) According to the believers of these theories, the aim of the encryption was to make it harder for certain agencies’ algorithms – such as the CIA and FBI –, to find Q and to remove where the user posts these messages. These agencies are viewed as servants of the hidden ultimate enemy of humanity and Q (usually referred to as the “deep state”, or Cabal).

26) A common conspiracy theory in QAnon groups, revolving around a small pizzeria in Washington D.C., named Comet Ping Pong. According to their theory, it is the headquarter of a “worldwide Satanist child-trafficking pedophile ring”. This information was supposedly leaked from the 2016 Democrat campaign manager, John Podesta’s laptop. Due to the popularity of this theory, the pizzeria received several assaults and bomb threats. In late 2016 a 28-year-old man, named Edgar Maddison Welch even attempted an armed assault targeting the restaurant. Later he received four years in prison for his actions. He admittedly was “self-investigating” the place and was trying to find proof for his beliefs, which he read online on 4chan.

27) Former US president, Donald Trump heavily relied on the rhetoric and theories of QAnon in his 2016 campaign, which granted him a great sum of votes in certain states. After his inauguration, the conspiracy theorists started to include him, titling Trump as *Geotus* (God-emperor of the United States) – a godly-anointed transcendental individual, battling the forces of evil. His 2021 loss of election was met by a twofold effect: one part of QAnon followers doubled down with the former rhetoric, claiming that the election was stolen by the deep state. These were the individuals, who later stormed the Capital building in January 2021. The other segment of the movement’s following distanced themselves from Trump’s former reverence, claiming that he had struck a deal with the Cabal, joining them, hence abandoning the original cause.

28) The site itself is not quite “user friendly,” which creates yet another feeling of encryption and hiddenness. Common users, who have not been introduced to navigation through these kinds of sites would find the forums unusable and puzzling, even while reading one thread. The navigation between multiple threads would seem even more difficult – if not impossible – to such users.

were more direct and understandable to this user base. The prophetic and “encrypted” messages appeared later (in the late second phase) when the following of the threads started to grow exponentially. The joint efforts to decipher these hidden messages brought greater numbers of interested users to these threads, creating the secondary basis of the movement – yet these discussions were still limited to the platform. Interestingly, the formulated community gained a unique functionality over time, and differentiated itself with the distinct name of “digital soldiers.” This designation was later applied to extremely online user s<sup>29)</sup> of said forums, whose main task was to convey Q’s messages to other, more popularly used sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (and TikTok after 2018<sup>30)</sup>).

The third evolutionary phase of the QAnon movement can be traced back to the 2019-2020 COVID pandemic’s first months. In this period, the following of the movement grew almost sixfold,<sup>31)</sup> due to the change in targeted social media platforms and a shift within the conspiracy theories’ main narrative. In early 2019, common QAnon theories regarding former and current events – such as the Syrian civil war, the Central American migration crisis, the ongoing US-Chinese trade wars, or the burning of Notre Dame and the Amazon rainforest – started to appear on said popular social media platforms. These theories – including the ones regarding COVID-19, the lockdowns, and the “true intents” and “hidden contents” of vaccinations – gained even more traction during the first lockdown months, as social media sites were visited more frequently.

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29) Also referred to as terminally online, or chronically online. See: William Hawes, *The Rise of the Terminally Online: Digital Subjectivity and Simulation of the Social*. In. Medium 2021. 06. 27. <https://wilhawes.medium.com/the-rise-of-the-terminally-online-digital-subjectivity-and-simulation-of-the-social-465545aa59eb> Accessed: 2023.02.25

30) C. O’Connor, *TikTok Fails to Stop the Spread of QAnon Conspiracies on its Platform* See: [https://www.isdglobal.org/digital\\_dispatches/tiktok-fails-to-stop-spread-of-qanon-conspiracy/](https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/tiktok-fails-to-stop-spread-of-qanon-conspiracy/) Accessed: 2023.02.25

31) Just to illustrate the sheer numbers: when the Twitter administration declared to actively engage against misinformation and conspiracy theories leading on their platform, they suspended more than 150 000 QAnon related accounts (pages with significant followings: highly active QAnon theory followers and social media personalities) on the site just in the first quarter of 2020. (See: Crowd Tangle’s data collection on September 4, 2020. <https://www.crowdtangle.com/> Accessed: 2023.02.25)

The change of platforms also offered a new target demographic to influence and mobilize. Through the “fine-tuning” of conspiracy theories, and the exploitation of the “pick and choose” (or bricolage) attitude, every potentially interested user could have found something to “believe in” within the massive web of conspiracies presented under the QAnon umbrella. During this time, the movement developed new, targeted conspiracy theories that helped to reach more followers, even from formerly separate cohorts. This allowed the mobilization of not just traditional conspiracy believers, and far-right affiliates, but people from conservative Christian backgrounds and concerned new-middle class families or family members. The latter is due to a successful “hijacking” of the rally sentence and hashtag of the Save the Children: Humanitarian Aid Organization. However, the users on these new platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, etc.) could not “decipher” or easily access the newest encrypted messages of Q, thus they exclusively relied on a certain chain of informational transfer, from a number of digital channels. This “deciphering” practice also inspired ordinary users to join online communities and follow certain charismatic characters of the movement, gaining access to their theories and “translations” or even personal interpretations of said encrypted messages.<sup>32)</sup>

#### 4.1. The structure and self-sealing character of QAnon

The transfer chain of information also affected how the movement started to develop in the third phase: a highly hierarchical system developed through the

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32) The encryption process itself is quite fascinating and would require a separate study to analyze in detail. The mentioned digital soldiers generally use a method, which they define as *true numerology* to connect certain social media posts to the messages of Q with other materials, tweets, and contemporary events. This usually manifests in the practice of letter-counting of famous republicans’ tweets; deciphering these through the interpretation of a formerly received message; subdividing words into completely new meanings; rearranging letters in certain sentences, etc. The followers and organizers of the movement also have a unique symbology, through which they associate meanings to specific commercial images in the imagined global conspiracy against humanity. A most interesting study was conducted about encryption and sign usage by Janet McIntosh: McIntosh, J. The sinister signs of QAnon: Interpretive agency and paranoid truths in alt-right oracles. *Anthropology Today*, 38 (2022). See: <https://rai.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1467-8322.12697> Accessed: 2023.02.25

legitimizing effects of “knowing the truth” and “accessing the hidden messages”. On top of this hierarchy – in the sphere of transcendence and unknown,<sup>33)</sup> armed with the “true knowledge”– resides Q, whose identity remains unknown. Below Q lies an extensive number of “specialists.” These individuals are tasked to decrypt the hidden messages, which are conveyed to them by the extremely online “digital soldiers.” The deciphered messages are then later spread and re-interpreted by prominent QAnon voices; leading individuals – such as celebrities, conspiracy-believer channels and in some cases even prominent political figures.<sup>34)</sup> Some of these leading voices assume online personas, just like the character of the Canadian QAnon Queen (Romana Didulo), or after the Capitol riots, the QAnon Shaman (Jake Angeli). The latter is even more interesting, due to the fact that initially, he wasn’t a prominent figure, but the 2021 January Capital riots yielded him a substantial following. The popularity of the Shaman could be due to his unique mascara (horned headgear, face painting, tattoos, and the message painted on the board he carried, stating “Q sent me”) and active partaking, as well as the intense media attention (mainly due to his notable appearance).

However, the decryption process itself is not strictly limited to said “scholars.” Certain followers may engage in solitary, or joint efforts online (in close residence QAnon followers even form in-person QAnon meetings) to find personal meanings in the messages. This expansion of interpretation allows the individual followers to actively engage in the movement’s spread and gain the feeling of involvement within “The Storm”<sup>35)</sup> Through the joint efforts, new

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33) It is here to be noted, that the character of Q disappeared for 18 months after December 2020 and only re-emerged a few weeks ago on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2022. During this time period, the disappearance was met with a twofold interpretation. One segment of the following speculated that he/she/they was/were captured and executed or struck a deal with the enemy while the other cohort insisted that it is a punishment for the failure of the Capital Storm. These interpretations (especially the last one) strengthen the concept that the character of Q is viewed as a transcendental messenger.

34) Some of the most known QAnon advocate social media personalities are Infowars owner and caster Alex Jones, former TV personality, now conspiracy-theorist David Icke, and social media personality Mike Cernovich.

35) Term used to refer to the planned mass reveal and arrests of the enemy – typically labeled with the name ‘Cabal’. According to the QAnon conspiracy, this event will pave the way to the re-establishment of the US, as a global power once again.



groups, and sub-movements may emerge with their own interpretations, widening the spectrum of conspiracies and creating local variations of more commonly known conspiracy theories.

Finally, through the intense online activity, some QAnon-infused theories may find their way to non-affiliate institutions – such as certain evangelical congregations’ educational institutions – mainly due to the close connections between evangelical and neo-protestant groups and the basis of several conspiracy theories, which are highly popular in certain Republican circles.<sup>36)</sup> The QAnon “inspiration” can be easily traced in certain preachers’ rhetoric according to their choices of words and chosen topics.<sup>37)</sup> The contextual interpretation in these cases isn’t necessarily required to be intentional, but in the end, it further exports – or at least prepares a fertile soil for – QAnon theories, hence increasing the movements’ future following in a proxy manner.

Actively engaging against these kinds of elusive conspiracy movements is almost impossible, due to the number of variations and the general attitude of conspiracy believers. Firstly, it would be impossible to debunk all QAnon theories at the same time, as some even oppose each other. Because QAnon is a highly individualizable movement, within its following everyone may find their personal “truths”, and it does not necessarily need to be coherent, or without self-contradictions. On the contrary, these traits even increase the influx of invested individuals, as they are intrigued by the obvious contradictions and wish to understand the supposed hidden meanings behind them. However, this only leads deeper into the “rabbit hole of conspiracy theories”. Moreover, anyone who still attempts to debunk these inventions are simply labeled as a servant of “The Cabal”,<sup>38)</sup> instantly dismissing any of their statements and completely closing off

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36) D. A. Cox, *After the Ballots are Counted: Conspiracies, Political Violence, and American Exceptionalism. Findings from the January 2021 American Perspectives Survey*, See: <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/after-the-ballots-are-counted-conspiracies-political-violence-and-american-exceptionalism/> Accessed: 2023.02.25. Survey used: <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/20457943-210016-nbc-news-january-poll-1-17-21-release> Accessed: 2023.02.25

37) *Ibid.* Accessed: 2023.02.25.

38) A collective term, used to refer to the „deep state,” its apparatus, and all the groups of people, who

any further discussion. In online spheres, this is usually combined with the exclusion of the individual in form of banning, silencing, or blacklisting from QAnon pages and groups. In the physical sphere, this may lead to personal alienation and long-lasting micro- and meso-social trauma. The generally aggressive responses to any contradiction, complemented by the constant inventions or re-inventions in form of “up-to-dating” theories, yielding “local variants,” efficiently self-seals the system, closing out any possible disturbances for the ones inside of this QAnon post-truth bubble.

#### **4.2. Meaning seeking in a post-truth world: QAnon as a quasi-religion**

The detailed structural model of QAnon provides a seemingly complex network for alternative metanarratives, through which the individual (as a meaning-seeker) may find personalized ontological and existential understandings. The interpretation of this moldable reality offers legitimacy for their actions, while also providing a way for narratively re-contextualize their former life events and turning points. In the created alternative (post-truth) world, the individual may attain the role of a *heros* (lat.), or a victim<sup>39)</sup> by projecting the reasons for their personal challenges and traumas to the quasi-transcendent (typically an all-powerful hidden group with malicious intents) enemy – which also connects the phenomena to René Girard’s scapegoat-mechanism<sup>40)</sup> while also creating activism within the movement in the form of small organizational cells. The forms of activism may vary from peaceful protesting, all the way to armed assault. The connection between said cells depends on the conspiracy systems’ homogeneity (i.e., whether the groups in question believe in the same narrative elements or not) and the effective presence

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are collaborating with them.

39) John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 4 (1981), pp.373-385.

40) D. V. Riordan, “The Scapegoat Mechanism in Human Evolution: An Analysis of René Girard’s Hypothesis on the Process of Hominization,” *Biological Theory* 16, no. 4 (2021), pp.242-56.

and proximity in a physical and online form. While the latter may result in an increased fluctuation between cells – which further intensifies the conspiracies’ spread and variability in the online sphere –, the proximity in the physical space creates smaller base communities, around which the more potent activism may take place.

Finally, by offering a latent solution to the individual’s existential crisis, QAnon also functions as a successful coping mechanism, offering pseudo-meanings and contexts for the individual’s trauma or ongoing crises. General themes regarding these are related to personal levels, such as (A/1) loss, (A/2) abuse, (A/3) mental distress; or societal levels, such as (B/1) alienation in micro- (i.e., family), to macro-societal (i.e., society) levels; (B/2) distress from insufficient meaning-seeking behind political and/or social tensions; (B/3) distress from under- or oversensitivity regarding moral and/or ethical issues, rooted in seemingly diminishing traditional concepts or value systems.

With QAnon’s ability to offer a seemingly coherent solution to cope with such problems, the movement’s narrative dimension may overtake the functionality of conventional religiosities’ similar dimension. From this point, the movement’s metanarrative operates as a foundational framework, through which the individual may observe the world and act according to the moral and/or ethical imperatives the movement dictates.<sup>41)</sup> The doctrinal elements are provided through the aforementioned hidden messages and the expected reactions to these, synthesized with adapted or re-invented congregational meanings. Meanwhile, the ritual dimension may manifest in a plethora of forms: (1) online or offline gatherings, during which the “research” process is done; (2) the rally events and protests (either peaceful or less peaceful) for specific causes – such as abortion, child trafficking, debating the legitimacy of the former impeachment, (etc.). These events may also illustrate the fluctuation between alt-right, conspiracy-believer,

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41) Just like in other dimensions, QAnon does not have a singular common moral-, or ethical system. It rather adapts its target demographics’ – mainly the protestant and neoprottestant congregations’ – ideas and standards and fills these with alternative meanings and interpretations.

and other groups, both affecting each other. The ritualistic aspects can be observed in forms, such as “spiritual warfare” (i.e., communal prayers to ward off the Cabal, exorcisms, the blowing of the shofar), or more performance-centered forms, such as the ceremonial flag raisings and flag burnings, the stylized executions (i.e., hanging dummies presented and decorated as one of the imagined enemies), (etc.). During these quasi-ritualistic events, one may also observe the importance of the material dimension.

The common iconography, present simultaneously on shirts, flags, cars, and boards, or as tattoos strengthens the cohesion of the movement and allows the followers to recognize each other outside these events. Common elements are the quotations of Q, the letter “Q” on shirts or as stickers, cars (etc.); the WWGIWGA acronym, which refers to the sentence *where we go one, we go all.*<sup>42)</sup> One may also see “decryption results” and slogans painted on boards, highlighting some of the most common conspiracy theories. Other typical elements on these boards are the common Republican and alt-right slogans, as well as evident neo-Nazi signs, – swastikas, differently colored US flags, etc.<sup>43)</sup>

Nonetheless, there is one last important material element, which is mainly used as a performative tool, while also bearing an impactful – and most certainly terrifying – message: the visible bearing of high-caliber arms (typically AR15 and AR16 semi-automatic rifles). Regardless, the author does not wish to engage in a debate about public arms-bearing and its context in the US, – as a European academic, he is both puzzled and fascinated by the phenomena. However, the visible presence of this particular element in the movement may shed light on some of the connections between militaristic and millennialist movements encouraging “preparation” and “readiness.”

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42) This quote is also associated with the “QAnon oath”, which many QAnon followers and sympathizers took and published videos about online. The oath itself is considered sacred and unbreakable and seemingly connects all QAnon followers worldwide to a common goal. The oath also functions as a reminder, to rally instantaneously and devotedly to the calling of Q whenever needed.

43) This latter is due to the wide intersection between alt-right groups, such as the Proud Boys, Vinlanders, the 3%-ers, Identity Evropa, Oath Keepers, etc., and QAnon’s following.

## 5. Re-emerging themes and discussions

Simultaneously, the keen-eyed observer may not be surprised to see the re-emergence of public discussions of the late '80s and early '90s and the anti-cultist rhetoric. There are already multiple early forms of emotional- and therapeutic support communities, mainly formulated online. These forums and groups consist of family members, friends, and relatives, who consider themselves QAnon cult-casualty victims, as their loved one(s) "had been lost to the cult."<sup>44</sup> These early formations are developing in a similar manner as the American Family Foundation, or the Cult Awareness Network did in the late '80s. Each of these organizations was formed by concerned parents and was organized in a "downside-up" manner, with the aims of providing assistance, resources, and information for dealing with a seemingly endless palette of cults and cult casualties. One can easily see the clear parallels between the attitudes of the mentioned ACMs of the '90s, battling movements, such as Scientology, OSHO, or Jehovah's Witnesses, and today's early formations, taking up against something quite similar in nature. Today's ACMs [- or maybe "anti-new-social-movements (ANSM)] - are adopting the terminology of their predecessors, labeling QAnon as a "harmful cult" - highlighting the destructive potentials and deviant elements, as well as arm-safety concerns, the radicalization and sudden personality shifts of followers, strengthened by the organizational structure of cell-level activism. These new generational concerned and harmed relatives eventually will re-invent the contemporary forms of active anti-cultism and moral panics - or at least re-orient the original aims of the surviving ACM remnants of the '90s towards these new movements.

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44) The phrase highlighted in italics is an extract from one of the said support groups. (See: <https://www.reddit.com/r/QAnonCasualties/> Accessed: 2023.02.25.) The articulation of it resembles, - if not exactly the same - how Jean Merritt from the American Family Foundation or Margaret Singer from Cult Awareness Network - two of the most influential American anti-cult organizations - have described the affiliation process and the alienation from family, relatives, and friends. (See: <https://www.cesnur.org/testi/melton.htm> Accessed: 2023.02.25.)

While in the 1980s, brainwashing was used to explain why and how people would join new religious movements, such as Jim Jones' Peoples Temple, or the Unification Church (and prior to explaining the personality shifts of captured and released POWs in Vietnam and Korea), the disproven paradigm of brainwashing and coercive (re-)programming is once again re-appearing in relations to QAnon radicalization cases. New 'evangelists' of this age-old and dismissed concept are attempting to explain, how certain individuals' personalities with seemingly consolidated backgrounds may change drastically in less than a year. These successors of brainwashing and deprogramming concepts are re-entering the religious-counseling market, offering "analytic inputs" in the forms of deprogramming, exit counseling, and psychological treatments for families with such issues. Successors of Margaret Singer, John G. Clark, and Louis, J. West are now opening specialized institutions for their praxis, such as the Freedom of Mind Resource Center led by Dr. Steven Hassan<sup>45)</sup> or the Antidote NGO founded by Diane Benscoter.<sup>46)</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

The author of this paper does not plan to engage in a debate about the effectiveness and functionality of such "treatments." Instead, he would offer some interesting and promising perspectives to research this complex phenomenon in an academic manner.

The best contexts to analyze the phenomenon would definitely be Lee McIntyre's *post-truth paradigm*. Through these lenses, one may grasp how today's age distances individuals from one-and-other, and how it forms unbreakable "personal bubbles" of reality around oneself. On the issue of how real these concepts

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45) See: <https://freedomofmind.com/> Accessed: 2023.02.25

46) See: <https://antidote.ngo/> Accessed: 2023.02.25

are within said “post-truth bubbles,” one should turn toward Adam Possamai’s *hyper-reality* theory.<sup>47)</sup> The theory offers insights into how contemporary movements utilize popular culture and how it inspires individuals to create compacted forms of believing and belonging. The creative process itself on an individual’s level would be a perfect specimen to inspect with the tools provided by Carole Cusack.<sup>48)</sup> Her *invented religiosity* concept focuses on the two highly individualistic creative aspects of new and alternative religiosity: consumerism as an attitude in religious settings, combined with the intense need for personalization. Meanwhile the bricolage attitude – which can be found in QAnon – forms a multitude of alternative- and overlapping conspiracy theories, simultaneously deepening the question on vertical (i.e., variations) and horizontal (i.e., the distinct themes and theories) levels. To analyze the affiliation and disaffiliation process, one should turn towards John Lofland’s and Norman Skonovd’s world *saver theory*,<sup>49)</sup> while concerning specific conditions in disaffiliation cases (explicitly youth struggles with pre-adolescent crisis) one could reuse Saul V. Levine’s *identity formation thesis*.<sup>50)</sup>

However, it is imperative that social sciences focus on the online spheres, as this sphere will eventually be the most impactful frontier for quasi-religiosity. Digital platforms, as functional religious and quasi-religious spheres, are extremely quickly developing in today’s world. 3D-rendered sacred spaces offer new kinds of religious partaking, and the academic field already sees the issues of digital events – such as partaking in the eucharist through online broadcasts in Catholicism or the questions of how AI-generated sermons should be treated. Researchers are most obliged to pay attention to the complementarity of digital

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47) Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament* (New York: Peter Lang B, 2005).

48) Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith*, Ashgate new religions (London: Routledge, 2016).

49) Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” pp.373-85.

50) Saul V. Levine, “Radical Departures: Desperate Detours to Growing up,” 1st Harvest/HBJ ed., *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 33 // LVI (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), <https://archive.org/details/radicaldeparture00levi>, pp.125-171.

spheres in traditional meaning-seeking and as alternative rally spheres for specific movements. In these latter cases, traditional limiting factors, such as physical distance, and time zone changes should no longer be considered issues. This will necessarily bring forth a completely new form of socialization, with its own language, special ritualistic elements, and communal functionalities. Daniel Taninecz Miller shares this vision as well. As a data scientist, he has done an extremely fruitful study on the textual analysis of comment sections under popular QAnon videos on YouTube (before most of them were taken down). With these methods, he highlighted some novel observations, such as that (1) the QAnon community has an elevated interest regarding not just US, but international events, mainly focusing on China, Russia, and Israel, integrating these themes into their narrative concepts. (2) He has also found that debates about China are well received in such communities, receiving substantially more “likes” than any other international topic, which means that the QAnon-presented image of China functions as a major character in their “quasi-mythology”. (3) He also highlighted narrative parallels between Hillary Clinton and the Chinese Communist party, which dominated all China-related discussions. Other than these, Miller was able to create term several cohorts, with associated meanings and connotations. This could be extremely useful if applied in big-data analysis on popular social media forums, such as Facebook or Twitter.

Other than all these, the author recommends three promising research opportunities: (1) An analytical approach could be used regarding the crises of American Evangelical congregations and the usage of QAnon rhetoric, as a complementary tool for millenarism and generating mobilization, as well as for reaching greater numbers of potential affiliates amid decreasing church attendance numbers. (2) Secondly, it would be fruitful to gain insights into how mainstream media functioned as a catalyst, giving even greater informational presence and potential spread to such movement, through regular and in-depth reports on their activity. (3) Thirdly, an analysis of the current state of collective American identity, – similar to the Central-Eastern European wounded collective identity by



András Máté-Tóth<sup>51)</sup> – would be most interesting, explicitly focusing on the decreasing institutional trust, the need for new common grounds, and whether these aims are archivable in today's society.

Concluding all these: over the last years researchers have seen how a fringe online group has become one of today's most controversial and impactful conspiracy-theory-based new social movements. However, for certain segments of society, this isn't just a simple social movement but effectively functions as a quasi-religious system, through which the involved may find new meanings, complemented with transcendent verification and possibilities for personal historical and narrative reinterpretation. In the future, the field of the academic study of religions – especially new religions studies – will be obliged to provide new and innovative methods for understanding such phenomena in their complexity. If this paradigm-shift will ever occurs, it will also reform our – to this point '*de finite*' – meanings of what religiosity is and how it functions within society. The author of this paper is keen to see and be part of this change and excited about the future prospect of the field of the contemporary study of religions.

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51) András Máté-Tóth, *Freiheit Und Populismus: Verwundete Identitäten in Ostmitteleuropa* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019).

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■ 국문요약 ■

## 미국의 유사종교 집단으로서의 카논(QAnon)

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지난 10년 동안 웹 2.0 아키텍처의 형성을 통해 연구자들은 새로운 사회 참여 방식을 지적했다. 새로운 국경이 이전 메타 내러티브의 검증 시스템에 도전할 수 있도록 개방되었다. 이러한 상황은 평행한 “진실”의 존재를 허용했다. 불신과 불확실성이라는 현대 미국 사회 환경과 결합하여 2017년경 QAnon과 같은 대안적 서술 운동이 나타났다. 4Chan과 8Chan의 익명 온라인 포럼은 일련의 생생한 음모론을 위한 이상적인 인큐베이팅 영역을 제공했으며, 시간이 흐른 후 페이스북, 트위터, 인스타그램, 틱톡과 같은 더 대중적으로 사용되는 소셜 미디어 플랫폼에 등장했다.

본 논문은 이러한 음모론이 미국 인구의 특정 계층에 대한 유사종교적 시스템으로 기능한다고 주장할 것이다. “고르기와 선택”(pick and choose) 시스템은 이러한 개인들이 온라인, 심지어 지난 몇 년 동안 오프라인에서 번창하는 커뮤니티에 참여하면서 그들의 삶에서 더 큰 의미를 찾을 수 있게 한다. 이러한 형태들은 더 높은/숨겨진 진리에 대한 목표, 관련된 사람들의 “선택됨”, 모든 것을 아는 예언적 지도자의 성격, 우리 대 그들의 태도 등과 같은 전통적인 형태의 종교성을 지니고, 특히 새로운 종교 운동의 구조와 유사하고, 매우 눈에 띄는 요소들을 채택한다. 니니안 스마트의 시스템을 사용하면, 예리한 안목을 가진 사람은 종교성과 광신적인 음모신앙 사이의 구조적, 기능적 유사성을 발견할 수 있다.

주제어: 음모론, 음모영성, 카논(QAnon), 신종교운동, 신사회운동

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